**The Status of Literature: English teaching and the condition of literature teaching in schools**

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**Abstract**

Although the curriculum subject of English is continually reviewed and revised in all English speaking countries, the status of literature is rarely questioned i.e. that it is of high cultural value and all students should be taught about it. The concerns of any review, in any country, are typically *about what counts as literature*, especially in terms of national heritage and then how much of the curriculum should it occupy. This article reports on three inter-related pieces of research that examine the views of in-service, and pre-service, English teachers about their experiences of teaching literature and their perceptions of its ‘status’ and significance at official level and in the actual classroom; it draws attention to how England compares to some other English speaking countries and draws attention to the need to learn from the negative outcomes of political policy in England. The findings suggest that the nature of engagement with literature for teachers and their students has been distorted by official rhetorics and assessment regimes and that English teachers are deeply concerned to reverse this pattern.

**Key words**

**Literature teaching, literary reading, English teachers, National curriculum, surveys, interviews.**

**Some national and international context**

As, at the time of writing, another National Curriculum review is underway in England, it is timely to reflect on that element of the study of English which has been consistently claimed to be ‘timeless’, that is the study of Literature. The year 2011 also saw the ending of The Strategies[[2]](#endnote-1) in England, a hugely significant and prescriptive policy affecting all teachers but English teachers especially. A change of government [2010] also suggests a potentially much greater freedom for schools over the content of the curriculum in all subjects[[3]](#endnote-2). These changes combined together offer an opportunity to reinvigorate Literature teaching in the second decade of the 21st century.

The history of English as a subject since the 1870s is littered with debates about the place of literature but never about the total displacement of literature from the curriculum. The questions tend to be ‘how much’ and ‘what kind of texts count as literature’; these debates are well documented elsewhere [Newbolt, 1921; Dixon, 1967; Mathieson, 1975; Eagleton, 1975; Cox, 1991; Britton, 1993; Bousted, 2000; Marshall, 2000; Andrews, 2010]. These debates are equally prevalent in the curricular history of other English speaking countries and comparisons between countries are always revealing see, for example Langer, [1995] and Beach et al [2006] in the US, Misson and Morgan, in Australia [2006].

One factor I wish to explore, albeit modestly in this article, is what we mean when we, that is secondary English teachers, talk about *reading literature*. It is my hypothesis that the majority view the reading of literature as essentially experiential, aesthetic and affective and that it should feel an authentic experience for the student with some genuine personal significance. This is an emphasis and does not exclude the efferent or the analytical. However, it is centred on *personal response* and engagement. Although not part of teachers’ vocabulary in England, the theoretical orientation is that of Reader Response [RR], deriving from Rosenblatt’s seminal work [Rosenblatt, 1938] and that is certainly my perspective. The simplest definition of RR is that the actual text is created in a transaction between the reader and the material text and so the actual text inevitably has some personal interpretation. An additional element is the espousal of the Personal growth model of English by English teachers generally and by myself in previous writing; English teachers ‘loyalty’ to this model is consistent over 25 years [Goodwyn, 2010]; see further elaboration below. The research described below suggests that whatever the mismatch between official rhetoric and practical realities, English is still very focused on the study of literature. The struggle for English teachers is that the rhetorical status of literary study is in tension with the real importance of literary engagement and how current assessment regimes in particular, diminish what is valuable in the engagement of students with literature.

At the ‘official’ level the status of literature in schools in England, especially English Literature, is as high as it has ever been and the rhetoric about its importance, [see below] is emphatic. Rhetoric is a complex term but I use it in one of its simpler, and somewhat negative, definitions as speech or writing expressed in terms calculated to persuade; hence language characterized by artificial or ostentatious expression. This form of rhetoric, I would argue, tends to be the discourse of the state when it comes to many things educational. In this regard England can be compared to most other English speaking countries where the state [or states within the federal state] give literature high status and describe it in grandiose terms.

The inflated claims made for reading Great English Literature (see Eagleton, 1975, Mathieson 1975), trumpeted so often since the nineteenth century, have actually long since been discredited especially by the literary establishment itself. In relation to school English teaching however these claims are still resonant in the Cultural Heritage perspective towards literature promoted by Matthew Arnold and then ‘refined’ by F.R. Leavis, into a very English notion of a ‘Great Tradition’ [See Eagleton, 1975, for a thorough analysis]. The emergent claims of the twenty first century are less grandiose and based far more, although not enough, on the experiences of actual readers. Equally, they do resonate with those previous claims in suggesting that, ‘literary reading,’ is an experience with quite remarkable qualities and benefits for those who genuinely engage with it. Even though it can be argued that Rosenblatt started this reader response view of literary reading back in 1938, it is still an emergent field struggling to develop a more empirical base to explain the nature of literature and why we produce and read it [Miall, 2006]. ‘Literary reading’, as a field of study, is largely a continuation of RR but with a much stronger empirical base through principally psychological, experimental research. Such research has not influenced policy makers, therefore the political rhetoric, certainly in England, continues the idea of the grandiose value of literature to be studied in schools.

Although the research discussed below is all from England, the issues the data explores are very comparable to other English speaking systems and there is value in some attention to some similarities and some differences. For example, in the USA and Canada the status of literature is very evident at the state level, despite there being no National Curriculum. Australia, after a long history of fiercely independent state level education, is in the process of developing a National Curriculum and English was one of the first subjects to be defined (see Australian National Curriculum Board, 2009 and 2011, see web sites listed below). New Zealand has been revising its National Curriculum for some years and a new version was fully implemented in 2010 (see Ministry of Education, curriculum online). In each of these four countries there is some healthy debate about the relationship between their own literatures and that of the UK, sometimes called British Literature, sometimes English Literature. The New Zealand English document is emphatic about literature but carefully places its UK heritage in its local perspective

The study of New Zealand and world literature contributes to students’ developing sense of identity, their awareness of New Zealand’s bicultural heritage, and their understanding of the world. (Ministry of Education, 2009)

In the Australian *Shaping the National Curriculum* document there is a great deal of emphasis on the cultural diversity of Australia and on the importance of all kinds of text but these statements below reveal something of the underlying position of literature:

Literature will be a core element at every stage of the National English curriculum. Through a variety of experiences students will be supported to acquire the motivation, skills, and knowledge to develop an informed appreciation of literature.

In studying literature, students will increasingly reflect on the processes by which some works have been found to offer distinctive personal, cultural, social, and aesthetic experiences. They will explore why literature in some form has persisted in mattering to individuals and cultures.

(National Curriculum Board, 2009)

In both New Zealand and Australia, the place of literature and its importance are clear, with each country having its ongoing debate, mostly played out in the media’s reactions to state documents, about the relationship between literature and national identity. However, a very significant difference in all four countries, compared to England, is the degree of classroom autonomy afforded to teachers and their freedom to choose texts and modes of assessment. It seems likely that these freedoms might be increasingly diminished, in that sense the story from England is a valuable ‘warning’ to English teachers around the world to protect the true importance of literature from political interference.

**The National Curriculum ‘version’ of literature and the ‘version’ in The Framework for English**

This statement acted as a preamble to the National Curriculum for English from 2000-2008 [see the Department for Education web site, section on The National Curriculum for English]

The importance of English  
  
English is a vital way of communicating in school, in public life and internationally. Literature in English is rich and influential, reflecting the experience of people from many countries and times. In studying English pupils develop skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. It enables them to express themselves creatively and imaginatively and to communicate with others effectively. Pupils learn to become enthusiastic and critical readers of stories, poetry and drama as well as non-fiction and media texts. The study of English helps pupils understand how language works by looking at its patterns, structures and origins. Using this knowledge, pupils can choose and adapt what they say and write in different situations. [NC for English, 2011]

In considering the status of literature, if we examine the two key sentences about Literature in English then the first articulates that such literature is ‘influential’. Such a claim is hard to substantiate but if one took as one piece of evidence the number of school and university students studying it around the world then the claim would seem reasonable; this would include many countries where English is a medium of instruction such as India and many African countries. Equally, if one measured influence by sales of texts, the same would apply. However, the pervasiveness of this literature is also part of the imperialistic past [and present] and ‘influence’ might usefully be interrogated as a very negative force, something the above claim simply ignores.

Is such literature ‘rich’? It seems that ‘rich’ is used in the sense of *full of abundance* or *of great worth* etc. but it unavoidably carries connotations of wealth and power. Perhaps this ambiguity is of value in itself? The comment that it is ‘reflecting the experience of people from many countries and times’ is both true and misleading, we really ought to add ‘some’ before people. However this interpellation shades towards the pedantic. My own experience as a reader [and those of many future and current English teachers who I have interviewed, Goodwyn, 2010] is unquestionably that I have gained enormously from such reading and I do believe that I have been provided with innumerable insights into the experience of others over both time and space.

The second sentence which contains the words ‘Pupils learn to become enthusiastic and critical readers of stories, poetry and drama’ is simply untrue, and in the current assessment regime, increasingly more readers who do have these characteristics are not enjoying literature in school settings. The research discussed below provides strong evidence to support this point. However, was it ever true? I think probably to a much lesser extent than English teachers would wish. It is not only the National Curriculum for English that has made grossly inflated claims for the enduring benefits of studying literature in school; and I do not mean here the extraordinary evangelisms of Leavis and his host of followers (see Eagleton, 1975). The justifications for studying English Literature [which is almost always the actual topic] bear no close examination because the habits of adult consumers of texts clearly demonstrate that ‘Literature’ [with that capital L] is not to their ‘taste’. I am clear that some pupils can ‘become enthusiastic and critical’ and I am also extremely clear that insisting [which is what we do] that pupils encounter literature in school is a perfectly reasonable requirement. Any adult should be able to select a literary form of reading when they wish to and there is nothing ‘natural’ about it. It is learnt and most definitely can be taught. I am arguing very strongly for a mode of literary reading that includes words such as ‘engagement’, ‘immersion’ and ‘reflection’ in relation to complete texts and this would include texts, such as plays and novels, that cannot be held easily in the mind in their entirety.

Clearly the paragraph from the curriculum for English above comes from the grand rhetoric of the state about its national literature. I would argue that English teachers would be critical of some of this rhetoric and expression but would certainly agree with some of its aspiration and its use of key words about imagination and enthusiasm. However, a significant part of the present set of problems is neatly encapsulated in the paragraph below. It comes from the DCSF [Department for Children, Families and Schools], placed on their Standards web site, acting as a preface to The Framework for English [2001 onwards] and aims to help ‘fulfill the requirement for the teaching of literature’:

There is clearly a balance to be achieved between providing classroom time to support the reading of longer texts and the imperative to secure progression. Having clear objectives lends pace and focus to the study of longer texts: there is less need to teach all possible angles on the text and more reason to focus on those aspects that cluster around the objectives. The aim is to provide enjoyable encounters, which serve the objectives well but do not demand a disproportionate amount of time. Teachers already use a repertoire of techniques (such as the use of priority passages, support tapes, abridgement, televised extracts, and recapitulation) to move quickly through longer texts without denying attention to the details and quality of the text. [DCSF 2001, p.15]

In a sense this is a much humbler source but it is more powerful than the previous quotation because it aims to prescribe the pedagogic model of literature teaching that English teachers must follow and be accountable for i.e. this is what, for example, Ofsted would inspect.

‘The imperative to secure progression’, is a phrase redolent with all the negative connotations of the previous decade [Frater, 2000, Hunt 2001, Goodwyn, 2010]. Its stark simplicity smacks of endless unreachable targets, measured against standards and benchmarks. More to the point, this paragraph reveals the fundamental problem with an obsession with apparently focused objectives and the nature of learning, especially of something as usefully ambiguous, interpretable and personal as ‘literature’. At a practical level it might be summed up as follows ‘why read the whole thing when an extract will do? ‘

The research evidence below, again, bears out a deep unease amongst secondary English teachers [of all ages and stages] with the dominance of teaching through extracts [see Goodwyn, 2008]. Of course, the final sentence in the quotation above, about teachers and their repertoire is, at least in my view, absolutely right and proper. Good English teachers learn just such skills of selection in order to introduce learners to all kinds of valid textual experiences, if anything I think they should have opportunities to make such selections autonomously far more often. But the issue for teachers currently is that they feel under such pressure that the rather messy and slow process of engaging with a longer text is conceptualised as either a luxury that cannot be afforded or as a desirable experience that must wait for the survivors of 5-16 who select studying at ‘A’ level. I would argue, following Rosenblatt, that, becoming a ‘literary’ reader, must involve the experience of a longish literary text and reflection on that experience by the reader. I would also argue that this experience needs to be refined through positive repetition coupled with maturation. Put simply, learners need this experience several times a year for several years.

The two ‘manifestos’ above are both problematic in their own ways as has been demonstrated. However the former is certainly more aligned with what practitioners both preach and practice when teaching literature and the latter is far more an attempt to dislodge that practice in order to respond to the ‘imperative to secure progression’.

**The condition of Literature: the view of secondary English teachers based on three research studies**

This section analyses the findings of three inter-related research projects, undertaken over the period 2006-2009. The first was a survey of student teachers of English as they completed their PGCE courses in 2007. The second was a national survey of serving teachers in the period 2006-7. The final study [see below] was a small, qualitative study of student teachers undertaken in 2007-8. These studies were all undertaken to examine the way current and student teachers of English felt about literature teaching, especially after several years of the highly prescriptive and assessment driven paradigm [The Framework for English]. The studies are, at the time of writing, several years old but apart from the removal of the Key Stage Three Test for English, and even the ‘end’ of The Strategies, the actual school context is currently the same. For more details of the survey and interview questions, please contact the author.

**National survey samples**

In this section I report on the key findings from the two national surveys of English teachers on the status of literature, in a relatively short article there is space only for a selected proportion of the findings. Study 1 focused on student teachers of English in their final weeks of their training year, there were 182 respondents from 10 Universities. Study 2 investigated practising teachers – there were 254 individual respondents from 180 schools. In both cases these numbers are well below the statistical level that would allow for a claim of being truly representative, and this is acknowledged. However, these surveys follow on from a many years of work investigating English teachers views about The Literacy Strategy and The Framework for English and the findings have a clear pattern of continuity [Goodwyn 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2008]. Initially, in the discussion below, the two surveys will be combined to maximise the sample and also because a number of the questions were the same. Then they will be treated distinctly for more fine grained analysis and because some questions were specific to the sample. Key Stages 3 and 4 are treated as one unit in these findings. The findings here are a selection from the data with the emphasis being on those questions that most directly relate to the ‘condition’ of literature teaching.

**Becoming a teacher**

As a preamble it is worth noting that the reasons given for becoming an English teacher were remarkably consistent and can be summarised as follows:-

1. Love of /enthusiasm for/passion for the subject
2. Working with young people
3. Love of literature/reading
4. Being good at the subject

These four are in order of importance to the respondents and it is interesting to note that 1. and 3. are very similar but that ‘love of reading’ is given a distinct status. Respondents do not put, for example, ‘love of language’ or ‘love of writing’. This survey, like others [Goodwyn, 1992, Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999] shows that the ‘next generation’ of teachers wanted to become English teachers at least partly because of a love for literature, they share that passion with several previous generations.

The three factors below are also significant;

5. Teaching is creative/full of variety/not an office job

6. The influence of an inspirational English teacher.

7. Good career/money/holidays

**The Importance of Literature**

When asked to rate the personal importance of Literature to them then, 75% said ‘Very’, 20% just ‘Important’ and 5% ‘Fairly’, suggesting that, from the teachers’ perspective Literature remains central to their teaching and their personal and professional identity.

As regards literature’s importance within the current curriculum then the results for importance diminished somewhat. Its current place was rarely seen as ‘Very Important’, only 20%, the next two categories were ‘Important’ 45% and ‘Fairly Important’ 30% and these figures are almost repeated for the prediction of the next few years. These figures suggest a solid place for literature although many comments were far more pessimistic, especially from experienced teachers who predicted the predominance of ‘Functional English’ and a much more Linguistic than literary orientation within the curriculum.

Estimates of curriculum coverage and numbers of Schemes of Work [SOW] devoted to Literature again support a strong role for literature. All respondents were positive about having SOWs devoted to literature with about 5% stating that all their SOWs were such. However, about 20% stated that three quarters were literature and the great majority, 60% estimated about half. It is worth noting here that the respondents who returned the survey may well be those teachers for whom literature IS very important. This may have influenced both their choice of school and how they interpret a SOW.

This point is partly balanced by the fact that the student teachers (within Study 1) had no choice over school and were also administered the questionnaires whilst in their university in class. Overall it is clear that teachers PERCEIVE that a great deal of work in English is centred on Literature in some way or another. As regards estimates of time, over 75% stated that they spent at least half their time on literature teaching.

An interesting difference is evident in the enjoyment of teaching. Of the student teachers, the great majority very much enjoyed teaching literature, with none saying they did not enjoy it. The experienced teachers (in Study 2) were a good deal less enthusiastic. About half still put ‘very much’ but almost half put ‘to some extent’ and comments tended to be about the negative pressure of assessment, the need to cover too much ground, [especially poetry at KS4] and a general sense that their teaching was not really interactive or creative and certainly not ‘inspiring’ in the way they felt it should be.

**Reactions to The Framework for English**

Respondents were invited to reflect on the impact of the Framework for English on literature teaching, the student teachers were encouraged to draw on their conversations with more experienced teachers as well as their own views. 100% said there had been a strong impact. Of the approximately 50% who chose to respond by adding comments, 90% commented in the negative, all stating, in one way or another, that literature teaching had become much more instrumental, dominated by narrow objectives and focused on textual extracts. Half of these commentators expressed extreme frustration at the lack of opportunity to study a whole text in any detail or depth. Many experienced teachers also commented on literature teaching becoming ‘scripted’ and on the emphasis being constantly on the assessment objectives and ‘a right answer’.

Respondents were also asked to reflect on pupil response to literature as follows:

*When students are being assessed on their response to literature, what kind of response is given most importance [regardless of whether you agree with this emphasis}? Please put these in order, 1 being the most dominant.*

*Analytical [ ] Personal [ ] Formal [ ] Creative [ ]*

*Please comment on your view of this order:*

There were some differences between Key Stages 3 and 4 but fundamentally, and taken together, 80% put the emphasis on ‘Analytical’ and ‘formal’, with ‘personal’ and ‘creative’ as either 3 or 4. Of the half who chose to comment, the great majority expressed this emphasis as the key negative impact of the last few years stressing that they felt pupils were missing out on the real point of literary study. Equally, they emphasised how disengaging the effect was on all pupils, even the most able, but disastrously so for the less capable.

As regards Shakespeare, all teachers (in both Studies 1 & 2) wanted to include him in both KS3 and 4. About 60% stated that if there had to be SATs tests then including Shakespeare was reasonable but 95% stated that the SATs were distorting and ruining Key Stage Three. What the teachers wanted was freedom to choose which Shakespeare to teach and when and to be able to differentiate teaching for different groups. The great majority,75%, felt that the real qualities of Shakespeare such as dramatic power and poetry of the language were being obscured by the testing apparatus. Since the survey the formal testing situation has been changed and the Shakespeare test has gone for now. However it is most unlikely that the curriculum itself as taught or the way English teachers teach Shakespeare, will rapidly or radically change as huge amounts of energy have been invested in the apparatus of the testing model; further research will be needed.

About 60% of teachers felt that the then GCSE requirements did encourage students to go on to ‘A’ level but their comments were clear that this could only happen with the right teaching and that, in themselves, they could be discouraging. Another 35% were definitely of the view that they were discouraging because there were too many texts covered superficially, especially poetry and too much teaching was driven by assessment objectives rather than personal response.

One of the most striking findings related to their views about how things might be improved in the future. These views were expressed as comments and were analysed for key words and phrases. In Key Stage Three over 80% wished to see the end of the Framework for English which was characterized as prescriptive, limiting, not student centred and assessment obsessed. All these teachers wanted much more autonomy and flexibility. At Key Stage Four about 70% of teachers also wanted much more flexibility and autonomy. They also wanted much more personal engagement with texts and with students choosing some of their own texts.

**A small scale qualitative study of student English teachers**

The third, small scale study of fifteen student teachers, consisted of semi-structured interviews in which each student was asked to reflect on their own literary experiences and to consider how these experiences might inform their own teaching. These were volunteers and therefore a random self selection but suggesting an interest in discussing literature and its teaching. The interviews were conducted about half way through their one year PGCE programme and after they had experience of two schools and therefore two English departments. They were asked to articulate their rationale for asking school students to engage with literature and to propose what makes a text ‘literary’. They were also asked to consider the notion of the kind of reader that they have become through both literary experience and literary study. A short section of the interview asked them to consider the status of literature in secondary schools, as well as being relevant to the current study, these questions link to an on-going project by the researcher investigating attitudes to literature in schools more generally.

The findings support the idea that reading literature has benefited the participants, that was key reason for them becoming teachers and that they believe the right kinds of teaching can have similar benefits for children. They also demonstrate that participants do believe that ‘literary reading’ is part of the spectrum of reading but with particular properties and characteristics that do justify its special status in society and in education.

As a group they feel literature retains status but most feel this is now highly compromised by the assessment regime i.e. teachers and students simply ‘have to do it’. In other words literature’s importance per se, is obscured. The group also expressed concerns about how much time was spent on extracts and how little on complete texts. They recognised the challenge of teaching longer texts but felt that much more was lost by such an emphasis on extracts. Emma’s comment below is a very illustrative example of the pressures of the assessment regime:

*Emma: Overall I suppose it’s very much exam texts, its focused on exam texts and the only freedom is in Year 7 and Year 8 and possibly, I mean, the school I was in last term they were doing texts in the first term of Year 9 so that they could actually do something other than SATs work and then putting all the SATs work into this term um but at that level you can’t do a Dickens or something like that. I mean we did do a bit of Dickens through extracts but it wasn’t very satisfying because you want to say you know ‘Great Expectations’ is a fabulous book but actually they are too young or haven’t, maybe not too young some of them but haven’t got the skills to really appreciate that. Um… but I think because I just love to lose myself in a book I find it frustrating sometimes that its very exam orientated you know and sometimes you get the impression from the teachers that “we’ve* ***got to do*** *this book”. Its not that “we are* ***going to read*** *this book” its “we are* ***going to do*** *this book” and all the connotations that that has and all the pupils equally is “we are* ***doing*** *Shakespeare”. “We are* ***doing*** *our exam text”. “We’ve got to get through it and write a piece of coursework on it”. Or “learn it for the exam and then we will never touch it again”.*

Most of the group felt that some teachers knew how to escape the assessment regime particularly by using ‘dramatic approaches’, ‘creative responses’ and ‘keeping it interactive’. But they also felt they were witnessing a great deal of stultifying teaching.

One of the most noteworthy findings relates to the ‘hypothetical’ questions asked about retaining literature. In response to the idea that a Government in developing a new National Curriculum, might decide to take Literature out of Key Stage Three, the universal response was of ‘horror’. The suggestion was characterised as ‘shocking, ‘horrifying’, ‘devastating’ etc. and the rationale given was that literature was the most engaging and interesting element in the curriculum and that it allowed for interesting ways of teaching the ‘other stuff’, like grammar. Over half said emphatically that they would not wish to be an English teacher in these circumstances. There is a strong relationship here to their original decision to become a teacher.

However, the hypothesis about Key Stage Four i.e. should it be taught only to those who choose it produced more diverse responses. Four of the group were clear that the age of 14 was just too young to decide and the benefits of literature were far too important to be optional. Four saw the rationale for offering choice to ‘young adults’ but felt that some literature should be retained in compulsory English. The other four felt that the advantages in having only enthusiastic students were very significant, and that it was a workable idea.

Despite these intriguing differences, this group of beginning English teachers had much in common, one very strong commonality was that they all considered that their own interest and experience of literature was a very strong motivator in choosing to teach English. The following points are also characteristic of the whole group who:-

* Have also been strongly influenced by ‘inspirational’ teachers of literature;
* Consider that literature retains status in schools but it principally has importance because of the assessment regime rather than per se;
* Feel that there is too much reliance on extracts and not enough on whole texts [challenging though whole texts can be];
* Feel that much teaching is ‘stultifying’ and ‘impersonal’;
* Would be horrified if literature was removed from KS3;
* Have mixed feelings about making it an option in KS4 but most would retain it;
* Want to be inspirational, passionate teachers of literature;
* Are certain that literature offers much to all students
* Are certain that they have gained enormously from literary reading;
* Feel that literary reading is a characterised by a powerful, emotional state of mind;
* Believe that this experience is possible for school students but that, under current circumstances, certain students are more likely to benefit from it than others.

**Conclusions**

For the teachers who participated in this research, literature in secondary schools in England still has a very strong ‘presence’ but its apparent material dominance masks a much deeper issue. It is still highly valued by English teachers both personally and professionally but its true status, in their terms, has diminished. This is principally because very narrow assessment objectives and high stakes testing are making literature, and especially extracts from literature, merely a vehicle for mechanistic outcomes. The more creative and personal responses to literature that teachers especially value have been drastically diminished. For example, the kind of depth that teachers feel can be gained from a thorough engagement with a longer and more complex text are almost impossible to manage given ‘the imperative to secure progression’. The empirical studies of literary reading [Miall 2006] are very clear that the personal is central to meaning making at all levels of engagement with a literary text.

Of the international comparisons cited above, Australia appears to offer one example of a more progressive approach which recognizes the aesthetic nature of literary experience.

* *In studying literature, students will increasingly reflect on the processes by which some works have been found to offer distinctive personal, cultural, social, and aesthetic experiences.* [Australian Ministry of Education, 2009, see web site]. As the curriculum takes shape Literature is now one of the 3 content strands, that is *Literature*: *understanding, appreciating, responding to, analysing and creating literature* [Australian Curriculum online, 2011]

If the findings of these studies are representative, then these processes are exactly what the majority of English teachers in England themselves wish to engage with and are adamant are most beneficial to their students; the word ‘aesthetic’ does not appear anywhere in the NC for English in England. It must be argued that other countries would do well to learn from England’s mistakes if they want to have engaged students and motivated and fulfilled teachers. It must be possible to design a National Curriculum which entitles students to an authentic experience of literature, perhaps Australia will provide a good model?

So, if English teachers in England are granted any influence, if some of their autonomy is restored, then the curriculum will change, the assessment regime will be radically revised and literature will regain some of its significance in schools in the way that teachers see it as significant. However, perhaps with some irony, the rather taken for granted notion of reading a literary text will also need revisiting. How much research has explored how young readers begin to experience this phenomenon and, of equal importance, why so many do not? English teachers know a very great deal about how to engage young people when teaching literature, and with some of the current restrictions perhaps removed, then good practice may be liberated. It was evident in the era of course work [portfolios] and then the early stages of the NC [approximately 1984 to 1994] that a reader response style pedagogy was operating in many English departments [Goodwyn, 1992, Goodwyn and Findlay, 1999]. The findings of the two large scale surveys referred to here are clear that English teachers are seeking to offer their students an authentic engagement in literature where assessment promotes and enables a personal response.

The proposed changes to the National Curriculum for English, possibly in 2012, and to the assessment frameworks may signal a new set of opportunities for English teachers and their students. This should lead to a paradigm shift in the status of literature in schools. The vision of English teachers remains that literature is supremely important for students but not principally as part of a grand national narrative. They have always recognized that ‘cultural heritage’ is a multi-faceted factor in teaching literature and certainly relates strongly to students’ identities and varied heritages. English teachers want all kinds of literature, from many cultures, to be significant to students and their developing lives. In this sense they want literature to have authentic status in schools, as something that really matters to them and their students.

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2. The Strategies were a Government policy to raise standards in all schools, the most well known example being the National Literacy Strategy 1997-2011, the nature of which was ‘informed prescription’ i.e. telling teachers what and how to teach, for a detailed overview in defence of this approach see Stannard and Huxford [2007], for a critical evaluation see Goodwyn and Fuller [2011] [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. The Coalition Government in England has introduced a number of reforms to the definition of schools. One category is Free Schools which, as their name implies, will have complete autonomy; the claim is that this model comes from examples in countries like Sweden and the USA [Chartered Schools]. A more significant new category is the Academy, such schools are no longer connected to their Local Authority [School district] and have a considerable control over the curriculum and how they use their funding. There are also other new categories such as Studio Schools, Teaching Schools, University Technical Colleges and University Teaching Schools. With such dramatic change and so little predictability the only source for information is the Government’s web site <http://www.education.gov.uk/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)